

Jimmy administered the sacred donut oath.



## MR SMITH GOES TO WASHINGTON (1939)

**Starring** James Stewart, Jean Arthur, Claude Rains, Edward Arnold **Director** Frank Capra **Rated** G **Out** June 22 **Rent/Buy**

Frank Capra is most famously associated with the sunny side of America. His portraits of the small everyman's innate goodness are every bit a part of Americana as apple pie and Norman Rockwell. *Saturday Evening Post* covers. But there's also real awareness in his movies of dark powers at work in the United States, and this sensibility is never more evident than in this classic.

While Capra's earlier *Mr Deeds Goes To Town* similarly pitted a naive good-hearted hick against city slickers - and the director's later, most celebrated film *It's A Wonderful Life* also threw Jimmy Stewart at the mercy of his worst nightmare - *Mr Smith Goes To Washington* paints a bleak portrait of America's corrupt big businesses and the press and politicians on their payroll.

Jimmy Stewart is Jefferson Smith, a starry-eyed idealist who leads a boys movement. When one of his home state's senators dies, the political machine taps him as the replacement to go to Washington, precisely because they believe they'll be able to make him tow the line. But Jefferson wants to make a difference, and his controller, corrupt Senator Joseph Harrison Paine (Claude

Rains), throws him a bone by allowing him to introduce a bill to establish a national boys camp. The problem is that the piece of land Jefferson wants the government to buy for the project is part of a secret backroom deal between Paine and his long-time master, real estate and media tycoon Jim Taylor (Edward Arnold).

Capra and scriptwriter Sidney Buchman sketch out this illegal matrix of backroom deals and manipulation in the first 10 minutes of the film, which, unusually, don't feature the title character at all. When Smith appears it's as the total antithesis of the cynicism we've just seen - he's the "aw-shucks" true believer who takes a montage-tour of Washington's proudest monuments as soon as he hits DC. The immediate counterpoint to Jefferson's unfettered enthusiasm is Clarissa Saunders (Jean Arthur), the jaded political aide who's been assigned as his minder. But even Saunders, eventually, is won over by Jefferson's unshakeable belief that the Founding Fathers meant what they wrote in the Constitution.

*Mr Smith Goes To Washington* asserts this worthy viewpoint, and it's a mistake to see it as simply a sentimental, flag-

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waving exercise. Rather, it's a film that demands that those who'd subvert the ideals of democracy have to be defied by people of principle, even if it means great personal suffering. And the lengths to which Paine and Taylor go - lying before the Senate to frame Jefferson as a criminal and using the media to mobilise the people he represents against him - are indeed the black stuff that'd be right at home in a modern-day conspiracy thriller. That Jefferson's last refuge is his ability to make a long speech to hold the Senate floor only makes this timeless film more relevant today, given that Bush and Co. are now trying to eliminate the right to filibuster.

Although Capra's film's political themes are serious, the light comic touch and topnotch performances also means it remains superb entertainment.

Few actors make us trust golden-hearted martyrdom like Jimmy Stewart, and Jean Arthur's livewire is a treat. Their exchanges and romance have real chemistry, and their individual character arcs - his to realising how the world really works; she to reclaiming belief - are inevitable but admirably unforced developments. Claude Rains, too, is excellent as the former idealist subconsciously pained by his corrupt compromises.

Rightly acclaimed as one of the greatest films ever made, *Mr Smith Goes To Washington* has lost none of its power to entertain while restating the value of the principles upon which our society is founded. We can only hope that Hollywood, in its infinite wisdom, doesn't remake it with Adam Sandler.

**DVD extras:** Frank Capra, Jr. appears in a making-of featurette and provides an intimate commentary about his dad's methods. This is not a bad effort, but such a film could probably do with more attention. There are also a trailer, poster gallery and talent bios.

**EDWIN PETERS**

**FILM** ★★★★★ **EXTRAS** ★★★